Developing an Acceptable Code: A Code of Ethics

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Overview

- Introduction: Seattle Workshop
- Baseline: Assumptions Underpinning a Code
- Moving Forward: Key Questions for Discussion
- Next Steps

Seattle Workshop

- Held in Seattle, Washington, March 17th-18th , 2005
- Expanded focus from biology to “life sciences”
- Included representatives from national laboratories, federal agencies, and academia
- Solicited feedback regarding code development and implementation

Seattle Workshop (cont.)

- Workshop Goals:
  - Engender discussion on potential content, costs, and benefits of codes of conduct for use in the U.S.
  - Understand the concerns of those working in the life sciences regarding the ramifications of a code
  - Begin a discussion of a process leading to steps for the establishment of any code for life sciences in the U.S.

Overarching Lesson

- Important to introduce scientists to a code of conduct by describing the potential scope of a code and presenting a well-formulated rationale regarding the benefits scientists might receive from a code

Scope of a Code

- Assumptions underlying an acceptable code
- Code Content: Elements of an acceptable code
- Institutional Infrastructure: Implement and maintain a code
- Stakeholders: Individual and organizational involvement

Features of a Potentially Acceptable Code

- Code should not impede scientific discovery while addressing national security needs
- Code should be voluntary at the national level; no mandatory enforcement
- Code should be rigorous, yet it must be flexible

Features of a Potentially Acceptable Code (cont.)

- Code should be assessed periodically and revised as necessary
- Implementation of code should be via existing professional scientific societies as opposed to government
- Code should use existing infrastructure to implement code when feasible

Seattle Workshop Suggestions for Code Content

- Ensure science benefits mankind/does no harm
- Ensure right to advance scientific knowledge
- Obligate individuals to identify/call out unethical behavior
- Obligate individuals to know the quantity and content of material and knowledge they possess and who should be granted access
- Consider dual use implications before dissemination of information, knowledge, materials and technology

Seattle Workshop Suggestions for Code Content (cont.)

- Ensure peer review for safety, security and ethical implications
- Obligate individuals to abide by applicable U.S. laws and regulations, and international treaty requirements
- Enable individual's right to refuse participation in unethical science
- Communicate the code and code precepts
- Ensure code reassessment and reevaluation

Institutional Infrastructure for Code Implementation

- Identify existing structures which could be used to develop and maintain a code
- Develop leadership and advocacy for code infrastructure
- Establish review boards for proposals and publications
- Create avenues for individuals or organizations to report concerns

Institutional Infrastructure for Code Implementation

- Develop programs for training, education and outreach
- Ensure organizational and individual accountability
- Ensure accountability for the principles of the code – without undermining support for the code

Stakeholders

- Wide range of stakeholders with whom to identify and communicate
- Need stakeholder buy-in early in the code development process
- Need further discussion regarding impact of code on stakeholders

Key Questions

- Burdensome Procedures and Regulations
- Feasibility and Effectiveness of a Code
- Knowledge Management

Key Questions (cont.)

- Authority for deciding research direction
- Universality of application
- Participation level of scientists

Potential Benefits

- Increased Public Confidence through better Accountability
- Trigger to Streamline Policies and Procedures
- Better Awareness of the Dual-use Applications of Science
- Improved Public Communications

Conclusions

- Several different kinds of codes – codes of practice, codes of conduct, codes of ethics
- Participants agreed that a code should *not* be regulatory in nature – a code *should* raise the individual's awareness of ethical issues
- The sense of the discussion was that a code of ethics, as opposed to a code of conduct, is needed

Conclusion (cont.)

- Key benefit of a code would be to create a value-driven social norm
- Social norm would not strictly enforce or regulate scientific research; it would be similar to the physician's Hippocratic Oath
- Signing the code would be voluntary; living according to its principles would not be because the code would create a set of social and scientific standards

Next Steps in Developing a Code

- Key components of code development process include:
  - Defining scope and goals of code
  - Stakeholder communication and education
  - Public communication and education
  - Developing institutions and infrastructure to support and maintain code

Next Steps (cont.)

- A systematic process for developing a code may not be well-accepted
- Variety of opinions among workshop participants – need to test conclusions with other stakeholders
- Process of code development and implementation may differ